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An exploratory study examined the informal helping relationship between adults seeking assistance with problems and the persons they selected as helpers. Fifteen men and 15 women were interviewed with an open ended questionnaire listing 50 possible reasons for selecting a helper and 35 possible ways in which a helper assisted with the problems. Among problem areas were careers, marital difficulties, alcoholism, bereavement, moving, family conflicts, and feelings of inadequacy. Problems had persisted for periods of time varying from six months to more than three years. Respondents selected helpers who were older, married, friends or relatives, same nationality or sex, and of similar educational level and religion. Men tended to choose helpers who were perceived as warm, friendly, and sincerely interested in them, while women selected helpers who took them seriously, listened, and kept confidences. Natural helpers appeared to share similarities to professionally trained persons described in counseling literature. Objective findings suggest that natural helpers may be identified through the testimony of those whom they have assisted, and subjective findings suggest that natural helpers may be identified by self disclosures in an interview. (author/pt)

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Informal Helping Relationships Among Adults*

by

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THE PROBLEM AREA

The phenomenon examined in this exploratory study is the informal, non-professional helping relationship between an adult seeking assistance with a problem and the particular person whom he deliberately selects as his helper. The investigator sought affirmation of certain hunches concerning this phenomenon in the hope of generating hypotheses for further study in the area of adult counselling.

THE HYPOTHESES

Individuals can recollect, and describe with reasonable accuracy, their problems, their reasons for choosing a particular helper, and their affective and intellective processes while involved in an informal helping relationship.

Informal helping relationships are in many ways similar to professional counselling relationships.

Insight into the phenomenon of helping or counselling relationships may be increased by examining the perceptions of those who receive assistance.

Sensitivity to the process of a helping relationship may affect a person's evaluation of the kinds of assistance he has received, and may suggest his own potential as a helper of others.

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE STUDY

A review of relevant literature pertaining to helping relationships provided the theoretical basis for this study; most people have problems at times; people react differently to their problem situations; some people do not know where to find help with their problems; many people with problems do seek help from others; people with problems select certain kinds of helpers; helping relationships appear to have certain special characteristics; non-professional helpers appear to be effective counsellors; more research is needed in the area of helping relationships; helping relationships may be better understood by examining the perceptions of those who receive assistance; subjective as well as objective research appears appropriate.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Respondents were asked two major research questions: their reasons for selecting a particular helper and the ways in which they felt that helper had assisted them. They were also asked to discuss the perceived similarities between their helpers and themselves, their previous relationship, their perceptions of their helpers' motives for wanting to assist them, and their own self-concepts as helping persons.

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*Outline of a paper presented to the 1969 National Seminar on Adult Education Research, Toronto, February, 1969; based on the author's doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1968.

THE DESIGN

A schedule, developed from the counselling literature, was used to collect data through personal interviews with 15 men and 15 women unemployed adult volunteers. It included open-end questions and two prepared scales: 50 possible reasons for selecting a helper, and 35 possible ways in which a helper assists. Responses were assigned weights; items were rank ordered; some data were subjected to a Friedman Two-Way Analysis of Variance by Ranks.

THE FINDINGS

The original hypotheses were verified.

Both the reasons for which a natural helper is selected and the ways in which he is perceived to assist reflected the respondent's feelings and attitudes toward the helper as a person possessing certain qualities and characteristics. The weighted scores for the items in Scale I, for all respondents and for men and women, are shown in Table I; the weighted scores for the items in Scale II are shown in Table 2.

The men and women in this study differed ($P < .001$) both as to their reasons for selecting a helper and their perceptions of the ways in which they received assistance. They also differed ($P < .05$) in the importance they attached to certain motives for helping others.

While the investigator underscores a basic limitation in that neither the validity nor reliability of the scales is known, she suggests that these findings indicate an area worthy of further research.

Some very subjective findings emerged from the study: many of the respondents appeared to reveal themselves not only as involved collaborators in the research, but also as persons likely to be more-effective or less-effective natural helpers.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

To what extent do variables in the recipients of help and their helpers influence the initial selection of a helper, and the ways in which the helper is able to assist?

To what extent do "natural helpers" reveal themselves (and can they be identified) as they talk about their own experiences in receiving help?

In what ways can training programmes for counsellors be modified or extended to develop the feelings and attitudes considered desirable in "natural helpers"?

How can adults who could possibly be regarded as "natural helpers" (often empathic, middle-aged women) be identified and attracted into professional and para-professional helping services?

TABLE 1

REASONS FOR CHOOSING A HELPER [a]

Item	Male	Female	Total Group
is someone I am able to talk freely with	54	53	107
is someone I respect and trust	53	53	106
is a sincere and honest person	51	54	105
takes me and my problem seriously	48	52	100
is a warm and friendly human being	45	54	99
is approachable and easy to talk with	50	49	99
seems sincerely interested in me as a person	50	45	95
acts as though my problems are of real concern	44	50	94
helps me feel better after talking things over	41	51	92
listens and lets me talk	43	48	91
accepts me just as I am	47	44	91
knows and respects my attitudes and values	48	42	90
seems to understand me well	47	43	90
seems to have time for me	39	46	85
is broadminded and frank, and does not insist upon always being right	44	40	84
was known to me, personally, very well	41	42	83
is a conscientious and responsible person	32	51	83
is a happy and well-adjusted person	44	39	83
can be trusted not to discuss my problem	31	52	83
has definite ideals, values, beliefs	36	44	80
is willing and anxious to help me	39	41	80
is kindly, and really wants to help me	31	37	68
is cheerful and optimistic	26	39	65
is calm, relaxed and patient	22	42	64
is usually available when I need help	44	11	55
had discussed my problems with me quite often	33	20	53
is reasonably successful in family relationships	20	26	46
does not tell me what to do	29	16	45
appears self-confident	22	21	43
has a pleasing manner, appearance and expression	18	19	37
seemed to need me and our relationship too	17	19	36
is similar to me in many ways	24	9	33
may criticize but does not judge me	22	9	31
is reasonably successful on the job	16	14	30

is a conscientious and responsible person	52	31	83
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can be trusted not to discuss my problem	31	52	83
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may criticize but does not judge me	22	9	31
is reasonably successful on the job	16	14	30
offered to help me	35	-11	24
does not try to impress me with knowledge and skill	11	9	20
had known me quite a long time	13	3	16
is a close friend or relative	9	4	13
was someone I saw quite often	12	-1	11
knew about me and my problem before	-1	8	7
had experienced a similar problem	-11	3	-8
was the only one I could turn to	-19	9	-10
may "put me in my place," argue, or even "fight" with me, but is really trying to help me	0	-11	-11
is very well educated	-2	-26	-28
is an "expert" in the area of my problem	-13	-18	-31
had some position or influence which could help me	-14	-19	-33
lived or worked quite close to me	-12	-21	-33
tells me exactly what I should do	-18	-24	-42
doesn't really like me very much, so gives an honest opinion about me and my problem	-50	-46	-96
was recommended by someone else	-54	-54	-108

[a]Weighted responses on a 50 item scale. "I Chose My Helper Because He or She:"

TABLE 2

WAYS IN WHICH A HELPER ASSISTS ANOTHER [a]

Item	Male	Female	Total Group
because with my helper I did not have to put on a front, and could really be myself	49	55	104
by realizing my helper feels I am a worthwhile person	49	47	96
by discovering that my helper really cared what happened to me	46	47	93
by realizing that my helper really seemed to understand me	44	49	93
by knowing I could count on my helper even when he or she was not present	46	45	91
by talking with someone I could trust to keep my affairs confidential	40	50	90
by feeling that I did not have to deal with any problem all alone	45	44	89
by having someone really listen to me	44	45	89
because my helper almost seemed to be going through my problem with me, and feeling the way I felt	45	42	87
in being able to reach my own solution to my problem	45	41	86
by being able to be with my helper, and talk about my problem	40	45	85
in building up greater confidence in myself	37	48	85
by realizing that my helper would "stand by me" regardless of my problem or how I handled it	31	53	84
by being able to overcome my tension, fears, and worries	38	45	83
because I felt my helper liked to have my confidence and trust	44	36	80
by getting opinions and suggestions from my helper	43	36	79
in learning to accept myself as I am	36	42	78
by being able to "talk through" my problem so that what I really thought became clearer to me	35	43	78
by talking to someone who wasn't surprised or shocked by what I said about myself	38	39	77
by growing to feel I could somehow solve my problem myself	27	49	76
by realizing that my helper felt confident in			

by being able to overcome my tension, fears, and worries	38	45	83
because I felt my helper liked to have my confidence and trust	44	36	80
by getting opinions and suggestions from my helper	43	36	79
in learning to accept myself as I am	36	42	78
by being able to "talk through" my problem so that what I really thought became clearer to me	35	43	78
by talking to someone who wasn't surprised or shocked by what I said about myself	38	39	77
by growing to feel I could somehow solve my problem myself	27	49	76
by realizing that my helper felt confident in being able to really help me	36	39	75
because I felt it made my helper happy to be helping me	40	30	70
in understanding it is only human to have some kind of problem	34	31	65
by realizing that my helper had problems too	26	29	55
in seeing my problem in a different way, and understanding it better	24	28	52
by getting information from my helper that assisted me to make some decisions about my problems	33	10	43
in learning to understand and like myself better	10	30	40
by realising it is all right to be different from other people	21	19	40
in hearing about my helper's own experiences	26	14	40
in discovering that I too am able to help other people	21	13	34
because I felt I was also helping my helper in some way	32	0	32
in realizing that I was not the only one with problems	13	14	27
by being told I just could not solve my problem but had to learn to live with it	-12	-5	-17
by having my helper tell me what to do	-24	-29	-53
in accepting the fact that I should consult an "expert" for further help	-34	-22	-56

[a]Weighted responses on a 35 item scale. "I Received Help:"

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